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Q and A

Sontay Raid: Intelligence Vs. Sense

Benjamin Schemmer, a West Point graduate, military writer and editor, is author of "The Raid" — a study of the unsuccessful November 1970 rescue effort to free American prisoners of war held at the Sontay prison camp in North Vietnam. He was interviewed by Washington Star Staff Writer William Jobes.

Question: One highlight of the Sontay raid was that it highlighted what some people feel is the fragmentation of the military-intelligence complex. Do you think it is fragmented?

Schemmer: We do not have a mechanism in this country for quick-reaction crisis management. That mechanism does not exist. And we desperately need it. The Israelis have one. In less than a week, they went into Entebbe and they pulled out the hijacked people. Of course, they had a lot more going for them in Entebbe than we did, not to detract from a magnificent Fourth of July present for free men everywhere. George Patton said a good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan next week. But we don't have the mechanism for that kind of quick-reaction crisis management. An example is, I am told, that it took almost two days to get the President's attention focused on the DMZ murders because, I guess, we had a Republican National Convention that week.

Q: What about noncooperation and competition within the various segments of intelligence, DIA, CIA, etc. To what point does that interfere with effective intelligence gathering?

A: I think it is overcompartmentalized. The secretary of defense — as happened in the case of the raid here — did not know until two years after the raid that we were conducting the rain-making operations that caused the camp to be flooded. In fact, after the raid in a conversation that had nothing to do with Sontay he denied that it had been underway in that part of Southeast Asia at that point in time. He had to write a letter of apology to Sen. Fulbright in 1974, saying 'Dear Senator, I'm sorry, I just found out that what I said in 1972 was incorrect. We were conducting rain-making operations.' You know, that is overcompartmentalization. Only one of the men planning this raid knew that at the same time we're trying to rescue these guys we might be causing a rainfall that might flood the camp.

Q: That was a Central Intelligence weather modification operation and Defense Department knew nothing about it?

A: It was a joint operation. Missions flown by the Air Force and reinforced by the Central Intelligence Agency with the Central Intelligence Agency conducting some related, reinforcing efforts on the ground — spreading chemicals which, if it did rain enough, would

cause riverbanks to cave in. But that was a very close-hold operation, one of the most closely held operations of the Vietnam war. Another example is the Pueblo. Here we have a National Security Agency intercepting traffic from North Korea in which it's very evident that North Korea is uptight and is uptight about the Pueblo and is sort of hinting that, 'Hey, you know, we're gonna do something about this.' And what happens to the alert message? It gets lost on a clipboard at the intelligence indicator center of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on a New Year's Eve. We've had the same thing in Cyprus, the same thing in the October 1973 war, long after Sontay.

Q: To what extent does secrecy interfere with effective operations, military operations?

A: Well, nothing is black or white. And I'm sure that 90, 95 percent of the motives for keeping something in very close hold, very classified, are at a certain point in time absolutely justified. I'm also sure that along with that is 5 or 10 percent of reasoning which may be unconscious or subconscious behind keeping something secret because they don't want to get dinged. They are oversensitive. And it does, at times, interfere with operations. An example is this business of landing in the wrong camp.

Q: In what way?

A: The largest part of the raiding force landed in the wrong camp. I think that was probably one of the two or three most closely held secrets of the Sontay raid. People were going up the wall when they realized that they had landed in the wrong camp. There was unclassified traffic that I had dug out from the files on it. They treated this as a major security breach, as though I had just turned over to the Russians the blueprints for the F15. The thing that really bothered me about their sensitivity to news of landing in the wrong camp was that if the full story of that were told, it could only redound to the

credit of the men on the raid. The people were landed on the wrong compound and it turned out not to be a secondary school, but bristling with troops. It took incredible courage and resourcefulness and quick-thinking on the part of the guy who made that horrendous 'blunder' when he let this helicopter back in and plucked those guys up. And yet they're sensitive about it.

Q: Isn't there an argument that the people planning the raid, in fact, knew that the camp was empty and went in anyway?

CIA 4 N. Vietnam
(Sontay)
(orig under Schemmer)

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